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## An oral history of bovine TB

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## **A very public controversy: badgers, bovines and bTB**

Overy, C. & Tansey, E.M. (eds) (2015) *A History of Bovine TB c.1965-c.2000. Witness Seminar Transcript. Wellcome Witnesses to Contemporary Medicine Series, volume 55*. London: Queen Mary University of London for The Wellcome Trust.

This interesting book demonstrates the value of oral testimony to the modern history of science and medicine. It is the 55th volume in the *Wellcome Witnesses to Contemporary Medicine* series, and the second to address veterinary medicine - the first being volume 18, on foot and mouth disease, published in 2003. Bovine TB makes an excellent subject for the witness seminar treatment.

The volume comprises an edited transcript of the exchanges that took place between some key players on 13th May 2014, when participants met at Queen Mary University of London under the auspices of the History of Modern Biomedicine Research Group. The transcript was edited in consultation with the participants before being published, so the final product can be taken as an authoritative account of what participants had to say on the day. There are no chapters or sections; instead, the book is a continuous stream of dialogue, laid out much like a play. Reading it, you have the sense of being in the same room as the witnesses. Photographs of the participants are included and short biographies are given at the end of the book.

The historical introduction by Keith Waddington reminds us that bTB has a long history, and that ideas concerning spread in cattle have been around since the 1890s, though often ignored in contemporary discussion. Until 1964, when a government policy on control of the disease in cattle was first introduced, bTB was largely framed as a public health rather than an animal health problem, and the emphasis was on protection of the public through meat inspection and milk pasteurisation. When the first badger infection with bTB was discovered in 1971 (culling began in 1975), bTB took on the characteristic features of a public controversy: competing interest groups, disputed scientific evidence and grassroots activism.

The main part of the book is organised in a broadly chronological way, considering early badger control policies and campaigns for protection in the 1960s and 70s; then the Zuckerman and Dunnet reports in the 1980s; and finally the work of the Badger Panel and the Krebs report in the late 1980s and 90s. Just as in conversation, the narrative flow sometimes gets interrupted. Someone may answer or comment on a question raised several speakers before and, inevitably, as in any lively seminar, some points go unanswered. However, this occasional loss of overall coherence is more than compensated for by the spontaneous nature of the discussion and the interesting twists and turns taken. The discussion seems to have remained good natured and collegiate throughout. Explanatory footnotes help put participants' comments in context and direct the reader to other relevant parts of the discussion. There is also a good reference list to key publications.

The book is a very enjoyable read for anyone with an interest in the public and political dimensions of veterinary medicine. It is also an excellent case study of science in society. A repeated wish by one participant that 'we could refer the whole situation to science' is understandable given the complexities and frustrations of bTB, but is unrealistic for several reasons. As pointed out elsewhere in the book, scientists themselves can be driven by agendas, their own social, academic and political networks, and the messy reality of 'real world' compromises.

In a period when politicians seem to have very low credibility, it is refreshing to hear Ministers described in more favourable terms. From an ex-chief vet: 'Make no mistake, the Ministers I worked with, with no exceptions, were extremely able and extremely bright'. An interesting segment discusses the current use of social media, especially Twitter, by politicians and campaigners, and how this has transformed the way that bTB is dealt with today. For example, an e-petition to end the badger cull initiated by Brian May was the most signed petition on the Government website, attracting 302, 253 votes. Participants speculated on how events may have unfolded if such citizen involvement had been available in the 1970s and 80s.

There are some fascinating pieces of information for the general veterinary reader – the fact that some badger sets in Britain have been dated to be 2,000 years old. There are also descriptions of some fascinating characters – the badger activist Eunice Overend, who brought a dead badger with barbed wire around the neck to a meeting with officials. She, along with several other 'formidable ladies' contributed to meetings in the west country even if, according to one witness, 'the nature of her style meant that she didn't actually have the credibility she deserved'. It is also interesting to hear of the important role played by wildlife ecologists and natural historians, sometimes working alongside veterinarians in institutes. The story is an example of the necessity for inter-disciplinarity in tackling complex disease problems. Throughout the book, you get a real sense of the passion in the way key players, often freed-up by retirement or changed employment, make their views known as they debate this most recalcitrant of zoonoses.